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## Book Review:

# Informal practices in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe: the shades of ambivalence

Rūta Skriptaitė\*

*Informality in Eastern Europe. Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices*, Interdisciplinary Studies on Central and Eastern Europe Vol. 11, edited by Christian Giordano, Nicolas Hayoz and Jens Herlth.

In spite of a growing interest towards informal practices during the last decade, the majority of research on informality does not escape the paradigms of otherness. Informal practices are associated with archaic traditions or particular regions, such as Asia or Eastern Europe. These practices are regarded as a sign of backwardness, as they hinder the development of political and economic institutions. Such West-centred approaches are driven by the duty to help the regions to get on the right path. However, it is often forgotten that the road to the development of formal institutions in mature democracies took many years of blood and violence and that there is no one size fits all recipe for a well-functioning society.

The volume *Informality in Eastern Europe: Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices* represents a pleasant departure from the labelling approaches to informality. It is edited by social scientists with expertise in sociology and anthropology (Christian Giordano), political science (Nicolas Hayoz) and Slavonic studies (Jens Herlth), who aim to challenge the prevalent paradigms on informal practices. These paradigms include challenging the widely held belief that informal practices have a negative effect on a state's ability to function, or that informal practices are a phenomenon exclusive to Eastern Europe. The book has two main objectives. The first is to establish differences in meanings, functions and effects between informal practices in Eastern Europe and those in the West. The second is to encourage an interdisciplinary interaction between political science, social anthropology and sociology. Such an agenda is commendable as it allows an objective discussion of informality, refusing to stigmatise it and providing an illustration of the ambivalent nature of this phenomenon.

The chapters in the first part of the volume look at informal practices in Eastern Europe through a general, theoretical and comparative perspective. Giordano's chapter adopts a historical - anthropological bottom up perspective, arguing that there is a correlation between informal practices and an enduring disagreement between state and society. The author discusses the phenomenon of public mistrust societies in South-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean region, where, due to various historical circumstances, 'the public sector is perceived as a dangerous foreign body' (p. 31). Thus, informal practices need to be viewed as a contextual rational choice and as a mechanism, which helps to get things done under failing statehood, rather than as activities, which undermine the acceptable – formal practices. Also, it is noteworthy that a client has more need for a patron than vice versa. This suggests that the patron should be regarded as a provider of more efficient services than the state's institutions and not as someone who is just merely taking advantage of a dysfunctional state system.

Hayoz's chapter uses the example of anti-government protest movements in Russia in 2011-2012 to convincingly illustrate that the informal is not necessarily negative. Hayoz also argues that in the Russian case the reason for choosing the grey path is a rational choice, caused by the overregulation and underenforcement of laws. A similar approach was taken by Anton Sterbling in his chapter, in which he argues that informal practices flourish in post-socialist societies because the public sphere is regarded as hostile and dangerous. Using Romania as a case-study, Sterbling notes that the lack of interest in public common good is caused by a combination of historical experiences such as the

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'lifeworld', the so-called living experience under socialist regimes, as well as a resistance to foreign or illegitimate authoritarian rule (p. 72). The rational contextual choice is also used by Maximos Aligisakis to analyse the case study of Greece. Aligisakis examines the Greek crises to suggest that the economic and political history of the country, which includes late and dependent capitalism as well as authoritarianism, must be taken into account. The author also notes that informality is not strictly limited within the borders of Eastern Europe or the post-communist bloc. In fact, this practice can be found in Western institutions such as the EU in the form of soft law or soft governance.

In their chapter, Kristof Van Assche, Anastasiya Shtaltovna and Anna-Katharina Hornidge argue that formal and informal institutions continuously shape each other while they are also shaped by the ones that existed prior to them. This dynamic makes it very complicated to judge which practices are acceptable in the modern society. However, when offering a recipe for the right form of governance, political observers from the West often tend to forget that the experience of transformation in the post-socialist states over the last 20 years shows that these democratic experiments can have various results. The formal Western institutions had to go through an evolution marked by violence and blood to reach their current form. Therefore, the idea of simply imposing the final version of these institutions on developing states without taking into account their particular circumstances is unlikely to succeed.

The second part of the volume is formed by case studies from Central and South-Eastern Europe. In her chapter, Veronika Pasynkova delves into the phenomenon of institutional informalisation and formalisation using the Social Democracy of the Polish Republic (SDRP) and the former communist trade unions as a case study. The processes of institutional informalisation and formalisation synchronised the communist legacy and, thus, provided a balanced co-existence of post-communist formality and informality. According to the chapter on informality in post-socialist Bulgarian politics by Katerina Gehl and Klaus Roth, informality is both a quasi-natural and a populist strategy to maintain the legitimacy and support for the ruling class. This is well reflected in the case of Bulgarian Prime Minister Bojko Borisov, whose populist political tactics include formulating an opinion about himself as a powerful, strong man from a lower class background.

François Ruegg's chapter questions the conventional belief that informality is harmful, arguing that in the Roma case it has a positive effect. According to Ruegg, the formalisation of the Roma minority would result in the stigmatisation of this group and its exclusion from society. More informality in employment law would provide the Roma with an opportunity 'to work unnoticed in regular jobs' (p. 313) and thus escape discrimination. In terms of the role of the media, the author stresses that current formality - the mainstream culture of this industry - produces images of the Roma people as unavoidably beggars, thieves or musicians. In this case, informality could be used to alleviate such misrepresentation and would help to introduce a more positive and varied spectrum of these people as businessmen, craftsmen or intellectuals.

The final part of the volume is formed by case studies taken from the post-Soviet environment. In his chapter, Jonathan Wheatley provides an investigation into the dynamic of the relationship between informal and formal institutions in the former Soviet Union and makes an observation regarding possible informal institutional change. The author argues that democracy is not a likely outcome in political circumstances where informal institutions are playing the dominant role. The author also claims that political change must be started 'from outside the governing political elite rather than from within it' (p. 334). Andrea Friedli's chapter discusses the public representation of Tatar ethno-cultural youth movements in Kazan. James C. Scott's suggested function of informality as a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott, 1985) is applied to the Tatar case. This weapon gives members of the Tatar youth movements the opportunity to speak out and participate in subjects of public interest.

The chapter written by Elvira Leontyeva examines informal network exchanges in Russian universities. Interestingly, the author observes that the most common corruption practices include non-monetary exchange. According to the author '[a]s one small part of a large system, the Russian

university reflects social rules and norms like a mirror, adapting them to its own realities'(p.375). One of the most prevalent informal practices that is exercised in this 'specific closed system' (p.375) of universities is the long history of blat. This practice of blat is well-defined by Alena V. Ledeneva as 'the use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures' (Ledeneva, 2006, p. 1). In the case of the universities, this informal practice can be interpreted as a shadow exchange of grades, which plays a role in the means of survival in the corrupt system of education. Finally, Abel Polese's chapter examines the functions of informality using the example of elektrichka (the 'running bazar' on a small train) between Odessa and Chisinau. The train is a reflection of various aspects of post-socialist society (for example, corruption, shadow economy and border problems), where people are getting things done to organise their welfare without the involvement of the state.

Overall the volume brilliantly challenges the most common negative paradigms of informal practices in Eastern Europe. It provides a thorough and well-illustrated discussion on the ambivalence of researchers and those affected by this phenomenon. Furthermore, it demonstrates that there are both positive and negative aspects to informal practices. The volume also convincingly illustrates that informal practices cannot simply be labelled as being solely an occurrence of this region in particular or inevitably having a negative effect on the functioning of a state. To avoid generalisations, the volume is formed by both – chapters based on a theoretical-comparative perspective and by case studies from Central and South-Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space. The book offers some novel perspectives on informal practices, viewing them as a contextual rational choice and as an alternative mechanism – a replacement of the official provision of services, where the state is incapable of carrying them out. Likewise, the book emphasises the dynamic nature of informality, which makes it difficult to make judgements regarding this phenomenon, especially from the outsider's perspective. Thus, throughout its chapters, the volume shows that informal practices are instrumental in many societies, and their prevalence has contextual rational reasons. Therefore, the one size fits all solutions proposed by outside actors are unlikely to work.

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